

15 May 1974

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Freedom of Religion in North and South Vietnam

Summary

There are two separate issues involved in the question of religious freedom in Vietnam:

- The freedom of individuals to practice religion.
- The freedom of religious groups to engage in the political process.

In South Vietnam there are no restrictions on the practice of religion. In North Vietnam religious activity is largely proscribed for the young, but religious practices among the older generation are tolerated, although not encouraged. Both South and North Vietnam have taken action against the political activities of religious groups and have sought to bring such activities under regime control. In North Vietnam by 1960, all religious groups were under effective state control, although the Catholic Church retains its cohesion and has some resistance potential. Successive governments in South Vietnam have been only partially successful in restraining political activities of religious groups. In 1955, the GVN disarmed two large indigenous sects (the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) and gained their political support. The government has consistently failed, however, to win over the Buddhists, and they remain a strongly organized, significant political force often opposed to the regime. In 1963, the Buddhists played a crucial role in deposing President Ngo Dinh Diem. Currently the Buddhists are badly rent by factionalism and pose little threat to the government.

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Religion in North Vietnam

Article 26 of the North Vietnamese constitution of 1960 states that "citizens of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam enjoy freedom of religious belief; they may practice or not practice a religion." In reality, this constitutional right is only a pose useful to Hanoi for world propaganda purposes. The North Vietnamese have used social legislation, propaganda, and indoctrination to ensure that religious groups are subservient to the state and to discourage people, especially younger groups, from practicing religion. The North Vietnamese have not resorted to draconian measures, such as those adopted by the Chinese Communists, to stamp out religion, but have generally followed the more moderate course pursued by most European communist states. DRV religious policy seems to be dictated more by political and economic considerations than by ideology. Hanoi believes it must control all potential sources of opposition and resents the diffusion of economic resources involved in religious practice. The practical consequence of this attitude has been the toleration of religion practiced by older people and by people in remote rural areas, and wary acquiescence in the continued existence of a substantial Roman Catholic minority in the North.

Although about half the Catholic population fled south after the 1954 partition of the country, 700,000 remained -- about 5 percent of the total population. They were concentrated in the rural areas of a few provinces, and have shown a cohesion which the Communists have found hard to weaken. In dealing with the Catholics, the DRV has vacillated between policies of conciliation and harsh repression. In a Christmas 1954 message to the Catholics, President Ho Chi Minh promised "to respect religious freedom." Excesses of a land reform program in 1955-1956, however, led to violent riots in the heavily Catholic province of Nghe An in November 1956. After crushing the revolt, the DRV adopted placating policies and even allowed Catholics to rebuild churches.

Church-state relations deteriorated in 1960. The church was cut off from physical contact with Rome, and all foreign priests were expelled. The church had long had a high proportion of native-born clergy, however, and these men continued to perform masses, weddings and other church ceremonies--harassed but not totally suppressed by the regime. The DRV has closed down most, if not all, seminaries and thus prevented the church from training enough new priests to replace the aging clergy. This suggests that the regime intends to weaken the church through attrition rather than open suppression.

Other religions in North Vietnam, less cohesive and resilient than the Catholic Church, have fared less well under relentless Communist pressures. The Communists quickly assumed control of Buddhist temples--the North's principal religion in 1954--and forced most of them to close. A Buddhist front organization has been formed for the purposes of propagandizing Buddhist groups and priests in other parts of Southeast Asia with the North Vietnamese line. The number of practicing Buddhists has been declining as older members die and are now estimated to number around 100,000. The DRV strongly discourages training of new Buddhist priests, and youth in general has not been drawn to Buddhism partially because of Communist propaganda which claims that idle temple lands and unemployed priests waste valuable economic resources. A few show pagodas remain open in Hanoi and other urban areas, and from time to time Buddhist festivities are celebrated to sustain the regime's claim to religious tolerance.

#### Religion in South Vietnam

Since South Vietnam achieved its independence in 1954, religion has been heavily politicized. Although this has not affected the individual's practice of religion, contending political factions have arisen within various religious groups which no South Vietnamese regime can afford to ignore. A major reason for the politicization of religious groups is that opposition political parties have often not been free to operate openly. Public assembly has frequently been allowed only in religious gatherings. As a consequence, religious groups have evolved into de facto political parties.

Under French colonial control, Catholicism was promoted in Vietnam, and Vietnamese Catholics dominated the political scene. President Diem's Catholicism, following the ouster of the French, caused opponents to rally under the aegis of Buddhism--the religion of a majority of South Vietnamese. Of the 18 million people in South Vietnam, perhaps 5-6 million are active Buddhists, nearly 2 million are Catholics, 1.5 million are Cao Dai, and about one million are Hoa Hao. The Buddhists have at times seemed nearly as strong a political force as the military, with the Catholics and perhaps the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai a distant second and third.

As a political force, the Buddhists suffer from factionalism and an inability to adopt a positive political program. The most militant and troublesome faction in recent years has been the An Quang Buddhists, named for the An Quang Pagoda, its headquarters in Saigon. Its best known leader is Thich Tri Quang. The An Quang faction has strong anti-Catholic tendencies and at times has been rather anti-American. "Divide and rule" tactics applied by the government against the An Quang faction have had limited success in splitting the group. Buddhist leaders often complain that the government, by closing down temples and arresting bonzes, violates their constitutional right of religious freedom. Such complaints are politically motivated. There is in fact no evidence that the religious practice of Buddhism as such has ever been suppressed. Inasmuch as most government and military officials are Buddhists themselves, a policy of suppression is unlikely to be adopted.

Roman Catholicism is the second most important religion in South Vietnam. Under the French, Catholics had educational opportunities and positions in the colonial government far out of proportion to their numbers. In view of these historical advantages, Catholics are still heavily represented in the middle and upper levels of the government. The Catholics are essentially pro-government, and more anti-Communist than the Buddhists.

For many Vietnamese, the tradition of religious tolerance in South Vietnam has promoted a tendency

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toward religious eclecticism--that is, a belief in several religions simultaneously. Cao Dai theology, for example, contains elements selected from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Vietnamese animism and occultism borrowed from French spiritualists. The Cao Dai movement was formed in 1919. After 1945 it had its own army, enabling it to govern a large area northwest of Saigon in an autonomous manner. The Cao Dai were forcefully subdued by the Diem government in 1955, but continued to practice their colorful religion without interference.

The Hoa Hao is a splinter Buddhist group organized in 1939. Like the Cao Dai it acquired political and military strength after World War II, and also like the Cao Dai, was brought under control by the Diem government in 1955. The Hoa Hao, who form most of the population of An Giang and Chau Doc provinces in the Mekong Delta, have become strongly anti-Communist supporters of the government, while continuing to practice their own unique form of Buddhism.

It is unlikely that the shape of religious toleration and practice in North and South Vietnam will change significantly in the foreseeable future. The North will continue to block the growth and encourage the decline of religion, while in the South the traditions of religious tolerance and religious political action will remain.

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Approved For Release 2006/11/01 : CIA-RDP80B01495R000500180011-9

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